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Africa Review

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Africa Review

Articles

**Liberia: Doe Grapples With
Dissident Incursion**

Liberian President Doe's hapless Army remains unable to suppress a seven-week-old tribally based insurrection in Nimba County in northern Liberia, the effects of which could further weaken his regime. The insurrection was spearheaded by a group of about 100 to 150 dissidents who—with some support from Libya and Burkina—infilitrated through Ivory Coast late last year intending to mount a coup. Although government troops captured plotters found in Monrovia, the rebels have gained the support of some 200 fellow tribesmen in Nimba. Military indiscipline and tactical and logistic problems have severely hampered government efforts to counter the rebels' hit-and-run attacks. Meanwhile, Army and rebel atrocities so far have driven an estimated 40 percent of the county's population into neighboring Ivory Coast and Guinea.



*Dissident Leader
Charles Taylor*

Daily Observer

Although the fighting has not threatened the President's immediate hold on power, security in northern Liberia probably will remain unstable for at least the next several months, aggravating ethnic animosities, regional tensions, and US-Liberian relations. The brutality and ethnic character of many of the Army's atrocities are likely to deepen domestic opposition to Doe's regime—especially as more inexperienced troops are sent to the area—and encourage more Nimba residents to flee or join the dissidents. The Army's ineffectiveness probably will enable the dissidents to continue to harass government forces and civilians for as long as their will and supplies hold out. The unwillingness of Liberian refugees to return home without credible guarantees of safety is likely to cause Ivory Coast and Guinea to renew public criticism of Liberia's mishandling of the insurrection. Doe may try to deflect criticism by blaming Washington for not offering lethal military

assistance

The Incursion and Dissident Challenge

In late December, from 100 to 150 Liberian dissidents—members of one of several anti-Doe exile groups—entered Liberia from Ivory Coast intending to mount a coup against the Doe government. Although the plotters—apparently the recipients of modest Libyan training and funding—passed through Ivory Coast undetected from their safehaven in Burkina, their scheme was ill-planned and ill-executed. They were poorly armed and some apparently hoped to rendezvous in Monrovia and seize weapons from a government armory. The dissidents include many former Liberian

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Chronology of Selected Events

December 1989 - February 1990

26 December 1989	Dissidents who infiltrated from Ivory Coast capture Nimba County towns of Bullo, on Ivorian border, and Knetu.
27 December	Military placed on alert, troops dispatched to Nimba under command of General Smith. Dissidents attack government forces in Bahn.
30 December	Doe broadcasts first public statement about coup attempt, assuring listeners "all is well."
31 December	Fighting begins at Kahnple. Dissidents capture resupply convoy with substantial quantities of arms and munitions.
	Troops close highway between Sanniquellie and Yekepa.
1 January 1990	Fighting in Kahnple continues. Charles Taylor, in BBC interview, claims to command rebels, calls for Liberians to join the struggle to remove the Doe government. Bullo recaptured by military.
2 January	Kahnple recaptured by military, but hit-and-run incidents continue throughout Nimba.
3 January	
4 January	Doe publicly indicts Ivory Coast for harboring Liberian dissidents and allowing its territory to be used as a "springboard" for rebel incursions; warns "we know how to cross borders."
6 January	Ivorian President Houphouet-Boigny denies Doe's allegations of support for rebels, stresses humanitarian nature of Abidjan's policy of allowing presence of unarmed exiles.
10 January	Ivorian Foreign Minister makes demarche informing Doe that Ivory Coast would defend its territory against incursions, but stresses commitment to peace.
	Captured dissidents displayed at press conference; claim Libyan and Burkinabe support.

military officers and were organized by Charles Taylor, a former Liberian official and a fugitive from US justice, under the banner of his National Patriotic Front of Liberia [redacted]

Although government troops quickly captured the few plotters who reached Monrovia, fighting in northern Liberia's Nimba County—home of the dissidents' fellow Gio tribesmen—has picked up steam over the past six weeks. [redacted]

[redacted] Estimates of civilian casualties have ranged from 200 to 500, although precise figures are unlikely to

become available. Although the rebels probably have lost a large number of men, they still are able to launch hit-and-run attacks, inflicting casualties, capturing government weapons and ammunition and keeping the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) on the defensive. The military has brought in reinforcements (there are now between 400 and 500 troops in Nimba) and evacuated border villages in an effort to isolate rebel forces. [redacted]

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~~Secret~~**Chronology of Selected Events**

13 January	Heavy fighting at Zali, on border with Ivory Coast.
15 January	Fighting moves farther south, incidents reported at Blewali.
16 January	
22 January	refugees in Guinea and Ivory Coast exceed 50,000. Doe threatens publicly to execute soldiers who harm civilians.
24 January	Rebels retake Kahnple and seize weapons, also attack AFL troops near Zogowe.
	General Craig arrives in Nimba County to take command of the anti-insurgency force.
26 January	AFL retakes Kahnple.
29 January	Doe accuses US of focusing on military abuses rather than the "Libyan-backed incursion."
30 January	Guinean President Conte and Sierra Leone's President Momoh meet with Doe in Monrovia to urge restraint. Offer expressions of solidarity but refuse to join Doe in blaming Ivory Coast.
1 February	AFL retakes and occupies Kahnple.
7 February	Liberian refugee count in Guinea may exceed 80,000, with another 60,000 estimated in the Ivory Coast.

The AFL's Poor Performance

We believe the inability of military leaders to control their troops has been a key factor in the government's failure to restore order in Nimba County, and has contributed to human rights abuses as well as operational ineffectiveness.

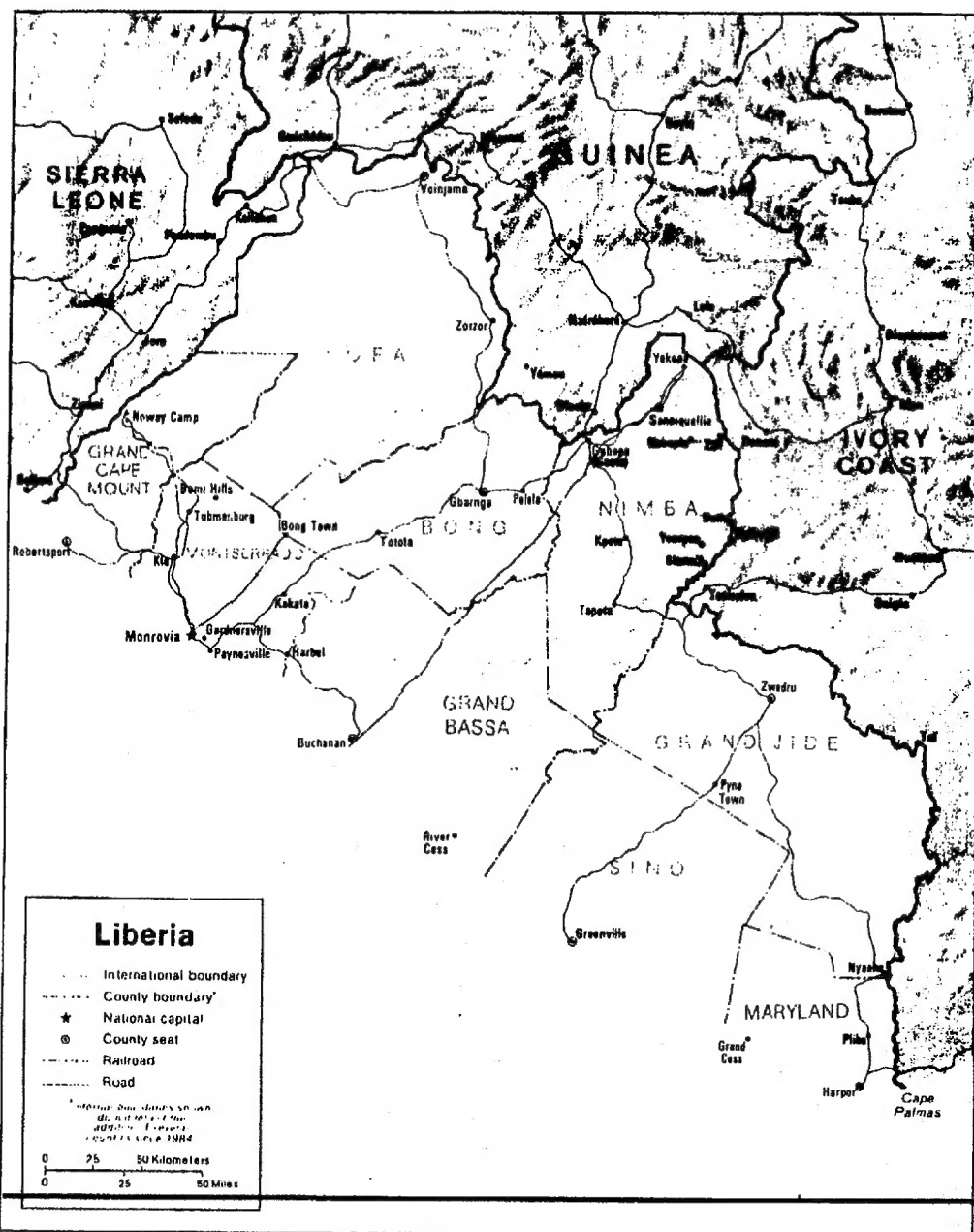
Military Indiscipline.

the inability—or unwillingness—of AFL commanders to control their troops has contributed to military atrocities against local tribesmen as have intertribal rivalries within the AFL.

Soldiers have refused to obey orders and generally have been more interested in personal gain than in fighting the rebels.

Ethnic Tensions. AFL atrocities have fanned deep hostilities between local Gio tribesmen and members of

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Doe's Krahn tribe who dominate the military. [redacted] the dissidents may have killed Krahns and Mandingos in a deliberate attempt to stir up tribal animosities. Neighboring Guinea and Ivory Coast blame the atrocities for the flood of refugees into their countries. Reports of random killings have diminished in recent weeks since the AFL evacuated most of the towns along the Nimba-Ivory Coast border and declared a dusk-to-dawn curfew for the entire region. Still, the mostly Gio refugees say they are unwilling to return home because they fear more military violence as well as further ethnic score-settling by civilians [redacted]

Tactical and Logistic Difficulties. The rebels' ability to conduct ambushes in Nimba's thickly forested areas has confounded and demoralized AFL troops, who are almost entirely lacking in counterinsurgency training, and given the rebels a clear tactical advantage. The military's strategy of retaking towns only to abandon them to the insurgents at nightfall has enabled relatively small groups of rebels to tie down large numbers of soldiers over extended periods. The soldiers' refusal to leave the main roads to pursue their attackers, because they fear the rebels' [redacted]

[redacted] aerial resupply to Nimba is provided by a twice daily run by a Cessna 208 carrying troops, arms, and ammunition. Liberian troops in Nimba have exercised poor fire control and, [redacted] at the current rate of usage, they will run out of ammunition soon. [redacted]

Regional Scapegoating

Doe has tried to deflect domestic criticism of the Army's mishandling of the Nimba situation by charging [redacted]

Ivory Coast, Burkina, and Libya with supporting the insurgents. Citing confessions by captured dissidents, he has claimed that these countries harbored, financed, trained, and equipped the rebels. The President's accusations pushed regional tensions to a flash point in early January when he asserted that his troops were prepared to cross the border to battle insurgents harbored by Ivory Coast. In response, Abidjan warned that Ivory Coast would defend its boundaries. Even though tempers have cooled in recent weeks, [redacted]

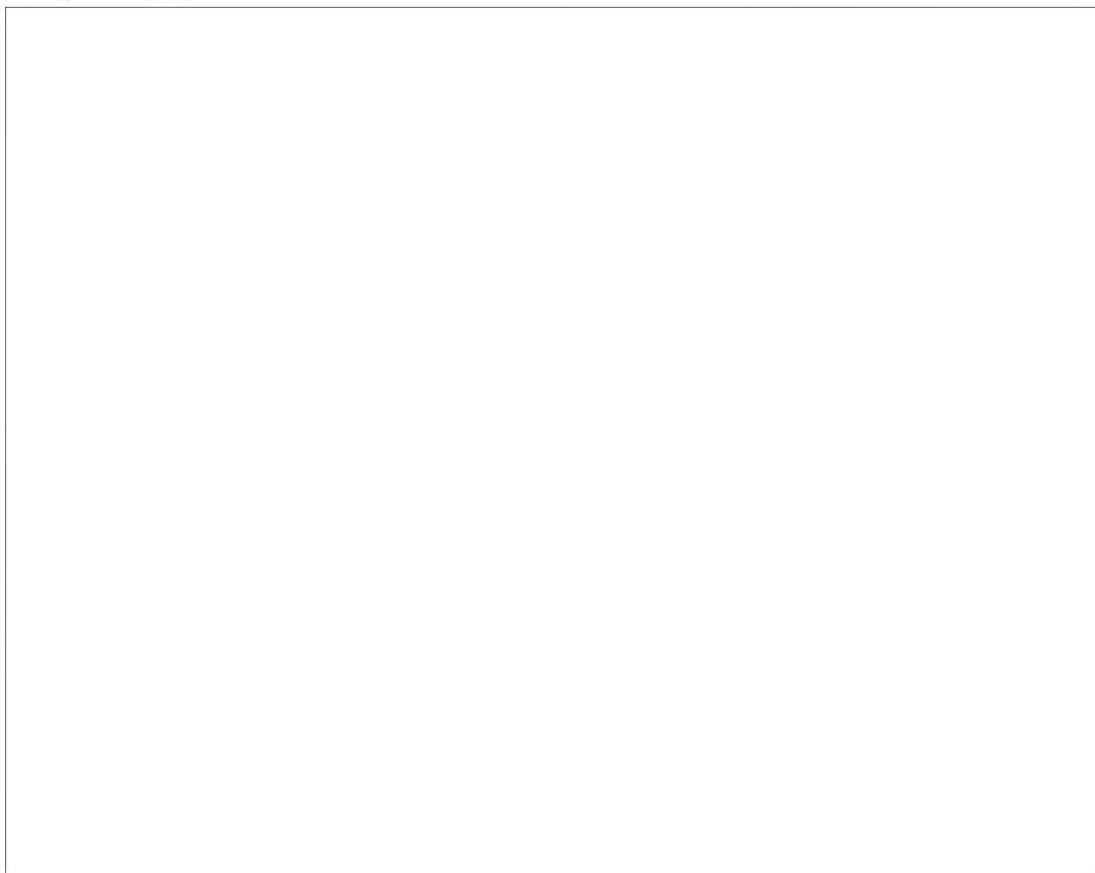
[redacted] Monrovia still believes Ivory Coast tacitly supported the rebels [redacted]

Despite the confessions of the captured dissidents, outside support for the rebels was probably fairly modest in our view. [redacted]

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[Redacted]
[Redacted]

Responding to International Concerns

The human rights abuses by the military and resulting refugee populations in Guinea and Ivory Coast have made the Doe regime a target of international criticism and led to relief efforts to assist refugees. [Redacted]

Focus on Abuses. The President has been sensitive to the international outcry against AFL atrocities. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted] unlike his dismissal of foreign accusations of military brutality after a coup attempt in 1985, Doe this time has tried to respond to criticism from the United States and Liberia's neighbors. [Redacted]

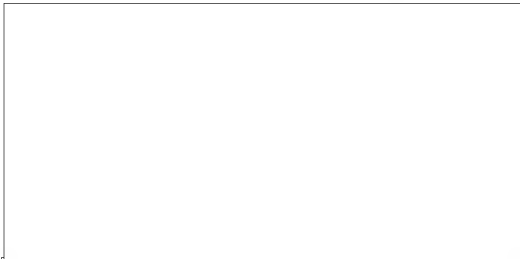
As accounts of brutal killings by the military have surfaced, Doe has shifted key military personnel and taken other measures to reduce tensions in Nimba. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

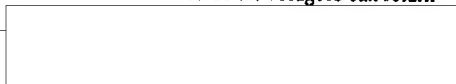
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Tackling the Burgeoning Refugee Problem. Monrovia is concerned about international pressures to reverse the tide of refugees streaming into neighboring Ivory Coast and Guinea. Both countries are ill-equipped to handle large numbers of refugees and have pleaded with Doc to resolve the situation in Nimba so the refugees can return home.



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[redacted] Ivorian officials estimate that during January some 40,000 to 60,000 refugees crowded into small Ivorian border villages between Toulepleu and Danane. The isolation of Guinea's border areas has severely hampered accurate refugee counts in that country, but local officials and an international relief agency estimate that roughly 80,000 Liberians from Nimba have fled to Guinean border areas. Ivorian and Guinean officials have appealed successfully to the international community for assistance, but so far only a trickle of relief goods has reached the refugees. [redacted] Based on our observations in similar situations, organizational and logistic problems are likely to delay the delivery of

adequate relief flows for several more weeks, increasing the prospect for serious food shortages. [redacted]

Monrovia has tried to coax Liberian refugees back home, but has few resources to commit to the effort. Doe has commissioned the Liberian National Disaster Relief Committee, a poorly organized, normally dormant group, to provide food and basic government services as AFL troops clear parts of Nimba from threats of rebel attack, and Liberian legislators and other officials from Nimba have agreed to try to convince the refugees that it is safe to return. Meanwhile, the

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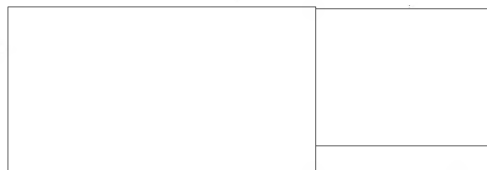
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International Red Cross has been granted access to Nimba and has distributed limited quantities of rice, cooking oil, and other emergency supplies. [redacted]

President Still in Control . . . For Now

The fighting in Nimba has not yet threatened the President's hold on power. Doe's public appearances in recent weeks have helped ease popular anxiety about his ability to cope with the situation. The major opposition parties apparently are abiding by public pledges not to exploit the situation. [redacted]



Outlook

The AFL's ineffectiveness probably will enable the Nimba dissidents to continue to harass military troops and civilians for at least several more months. The

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rebels probably can survive by hiding in tiny off-road hamlets where AFL troops are unlikely to venture. Rebel operations will be limited not so much by AFL troop movements as by their small numbers and ability to capture weapons, ammunition, and other equipment from government forces.

As ammunition stocks dwindle, AFL troops probably will become even less willing to risk patrolling outside base camps, leaving the field open for expanded rebel activity. If rebel threats to attack Krahn towns in neighboring Grand Jide County

are carried out, ethnic tensions would worsen considerably.

Liberian refugees are unlikely to return to their homes during the next several months without credible assurances that the government can protect them and provide access to economic aid. Relief workers in Ivory Coast have programmed relief supplies for at least three months with a likely extension to six months, if warranted. Still, Guinean and Ivorian impatience with Monrovia's ineffectiveness is likely to grow and the criticism is likely to be renewed if the situation drags on.

Fallout from the dissident incursion is likely to complicate Doe's already chronic domestic problems. The President's tribal reconciliation campaign, which has helped lower resentment of the regime in recent years, has been set back dramatically by ethnic animosities fanned during the recent fighting.

Over time, senior military officers may

become increasingly reluctant to bolster his regime if the executive mansion continues to fail to provide adequate materiel and personnel to units fighting in Nimba.

The economy of Nimba—considered a vital economic belt—is likely to be hard-pressed if the fighting is not halted soon. Logging operations have been suspended in much of the county. Some of the recently harvested rice crop probably has been destroyed or stolen, and if refugees do not return by April to plant rice, a large portion of Nimba's annual crop—which accounts for 20 percent of Liberia's rice production—will be lost. Although iron mining has not been disrupted, a wider insurgency could jeopardize ore shipments from Yekepa to the port at Buchanan.

Doe's difficulties coping with the incursion and its aftermath are likely to aggravate tensions between Liberia and the United States.

Meanwhile, pressure from several quarters is likely to mount for Washington to take stronger steps to express US displeasure with the Doe regime as reports of human rights abuses continue to surface, especially if Doe shows signs of backpedaling on political and economic reforms.

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